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THE ODYSSEY. LITERATURE CURRICULUM IV, TEACHER VERSION.

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A CURRICULUM GUIDE ON "THE ODYSSEY" WAS PREPARED FOR TEACHERS. A COMPLETE EXPLANATION OF THE POEM AND A DISCUSSION OF THE EPIC TRADITION, OF WHICH THE POEM IS REPRESENTATIVE, WERE PROVIDED. THIS UNIT DEPARTED FROM THE PATTERN OF OTHER LITERATURE CURRICULUM GUIDES BY PRESENTING ONLY A TEACHER VERSION TO SEE HOW WELL GRADE 10 STUDENTS HANDLE A WORK IN ITS ENTIRETY WITHOUT STUDY AIDS. RELATED REPORTS ARE ED 010 129 THROUGH ED 010 160 AND ED 010 803 THROUGH ED 010 832. (GD)

OREGON CURRICULUM STUDY CENTER

THE ODYSSEY

Literature Curriculum IV,
Teacher Version

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OREGON CURRICULUM STUDY CENTER

EPIC: The Odyssey

Literature Curriculum IV

Teacher Version

NOTE TO THE TEACHER

As an experiment, the teaching machinery built into this unit on The Odyssey is arranged in a different manner than that in other units. We are interested in seeing how well students on the tenth grade level can handle a work in its entirety without any study aids. Consequently we have eliminated the student version of the unit entirely.

The unit is designed to be used after the students have read The Odyssey The epic should therefore be given to the students to read well in advance of the time planned for class discussion. When the time comes to treat the poem in the classroom, the suggested questions for the students (with suggested answers, in parentheses, intended to aid the teacher), the introductory material, and the exercises and topics for composition should form an adequate basis for treatment and discussion. Further, the elimination of the student version will enable the teacher to modify or suppress or add questions, depending on the level of the class, without the students being aware of it. Some teachers have remarked that they sometimes feel too regimented and pressured with the questions in the students' hands. The system in this unit eliminates that problem and will allow the teacher to begin and proceed as he wishes.

The suggested topics for composition are so designed as to encourage considerable thought and discussion before writing. Discussion in class of ways of approaching such topics will increase the students' understanding not only of The Odyssey, but also of how to write about literature.

Although the unit is built around The Odyssey as a whole, and the questions and exercises are mainly geared to a discussion of the whole epic, not all students will be able to read the entire work. We suggest that slower readers be limited to the Alcinous narrative, beginning on page 139 and ending on page 214. It can be regarded as a self-contained narrative with a beginning and an end. It contains many of Odysseus' most famous adventures. (Another possibility would be to begin with the Calypso episode on p. 88 and continue to p. 214. Other possibilities also suggest themselves.) The questions and exercises can be adapted, or new ones be devised by the inventive teacher, to incorporate into the class discussion those students who have read only this section. Qualities of leadership and human weakness demonstrated by the hero, the relation of gods to men, the journey to Hades, and other significant aspects of the epic can all be found in the Alcinous narrative, for instance.

THE ODYSSEY

Introductory Remarks: The Epic

The primary feature of an epic is its size or scope: it is big in a number of ways. It is long; the narrative contains many episodes relating the adventures of the hero, who is always an exceptional man, generally remarkably strong and courageous, often an ideal representative of a nation or race, and frequently the action he participates in is significant in the history of his people. The action is large not merely in its length but in the demands it makes on the hero, who often must demonstrate superhuman abilities in battle or on a long and difficult journey. The setting is also huge in its scope, sometimes encompassing not merely the world but the cosmos as well. The characters usually include not merely a heroic leading character but often the gods themselves.

The point of view of an epic is consistent with the grandeur of the other elements: the epic poet is an omniscient narrator who sees into every corner of the universe he depicts and portrays the action objectively. The attitudes expressed (i.e., point of view, not in the technical but in the general sense) in the poem are those of the society in which he lives; he is the voice of his society. Style also tends to be grand, lofty, and serious and the rhythms of the verse stately, yet (although this seems contradictory) there is a generally noble simplicity in the poet's manner. Something of this comes through in Rieu's translation.

It is common to distinguish two kinds of epic: primary epic (The Iliad and The Odyssey are examples) which grows out of a long oral tradition, and secondary epic (Virgil's Aeneid and Milton's Paradise Lost are examples) which is the written literary creation of a single man, generally in imitation of one or more of the earlier epics.

Why study the epic at this stage? In the first place, The Odyssey is one of the great adventure stories of all time; Odysseus's amazing experiences with the Cyclops and the other astonishing characters of Books 9 through 12 and the great episode in the hall should prove absorbing to tenth graders. Perhaps, most important, it provides an excellent opportunity for the guided exposure of these students to the values, manners, and institutions of a pre-Christian culture, itself in the process of transition. Hopefully the experience will help them understand that to be different from themselves need not mean to be inferior and "ancient." Odysseus, however, will probably seem very "modern"; it is more appropriate to say that we are still "ancient." What does the idea of progress mean? This is a basic concept that should be raised in relationship with many aspects of The Odyssey. Can we truly say that the view of life of the Greeks, embodied in Odysseus especially, is less complex and mature than our own?

History

The expedition to Troy, which is the historical basis of the Homeric poems, probably took place about 1250 B. C. Archeological diggings have determined that such a city actually did exist in Asia Minor and seems to have been sacked about this time. This was the period of the Mycenaean civilization in Greece, so called because its center was at Mycenae. This culture flourished from about 1600 B. C. to about 1200 B. C. The Trojans were also Greeks and the battle of Greek against Greek was a common occurrence during this age. As a consequence, when the more barbaric Dorian Greeks pushed down from northern Greece, the Mycenaean Civilization was too weak to resist their attacks and the survivors were forced to migrate to the islands in the Aegean Sea (Chios is traditionally thought to be the birthplace of Homer) and along the coast of Asia Minor.

The four hundred years that followed, down to about 800 B. C., are commonly called the Dark Ages of Greece. During these centuries, when life was grim indeed for the Greeks, they cherished the memory of the exploits of their heroic ancestors who fought at Troy. Many of the words and phrases and no doubt some of the episodes of The Odyssey were first sung during this period.

Sometime during the eighth century B. C. the Homeric poems were probably composed; at approximately the same period the art of writing spread (some people feel that the Homeric poems were written down as they were composed or very shortly thereafter), and in Ionia a resurgence of Greek civilization began. It is the life of these adventurous sea-faring people that is the vital center of The Odyssey. The religion, social customs, everyday life, methods of warfare--the real world of the poem--is all Ionian of about the eighth century. The memory of the Heroic Age does not preoccupy the poet of The Odyssey. It is not a poem that looks to the past or concentrates on heroic warfare; it is concerned with the process of living in a new world.

Oral Poetry

The Odyssey is oral poetry; no one knows how old parts of The Odyssey are. Certain episodes and set bits of verse repeated over and over again called formulas (for example, notice that day always begins with Dawn getting up and putting light in the sky) probably reach back before 1000 B. C. For several hundred years bards like Demodocus in Book 8 sang or chanted tales about the gods and the Greek heroes. Because the Greeks did not know how to write then, the bards had to rely on their memories to repeat the stories, which they either made up

themselves or heard from other bards. The students will have read some traditional ballads (see the Seventh Grade Literature Curriculum), which are also oral poetry, often on similar subjects, though much shorter. Poems as long as The Odyssey would be difficult, if not impossible, to tell exactly the same each time. Consequently, the stories probably changed a great deal in the course of time, and the text of The Odyssey did not become reasonably fixed until very late in classical times. Scholars have had a field day "improving" it ever since.

The ancient Greek bards lived in the courts of powerful lords and performed in the evening for the members of the court, very much as the minstrels did in the Middle Ages. As a consequence, the stories are primarily about warrior lords, though their servants do play supporting roles in some episodes. One other result is that the episodes generally could not be longer than a poet could recite in a few hours in the evening. The present chapter divisions were added centuries later--critics have enjoyed trying to determine where the real breaks, marking an episode that a bard could conveniently recite in an evening, must be. Book 8 is an excellent illustration of all of this, giving what is probably a historically accurate picture of the place of the bard early in Greece.

Translation

One question which will occur to every teacher is this: What effect does the fact that we have read The Odyssey in translation have on our study of it? Of course, a prose translation gives no sense of the poetic qualities of the original, for example, the rhythm, the emotional intensity, and the compression found in great poetry. But it does have the advantage of giving a reasonably faithful version of the story in a colloquial style, which is generally more attractive to young readers than the poetic translations are.

The most obvious change is the loss of compression. Two lines from the opening of the poem will make this clear:

man in me tell Muse, many turns, who very much
Andra moi ennepe, Mousa, polutropon, hos mala polla

wandered, after of Troy, sacred city he sacked
plangthe, epei Troies ieron ptoliethron eperse;

In literal English these two lines would go something like this: "Tell in me, Muse, about the versatile man who wandered very much after he sacked the sacred city of Troy." Even in simple and rather clumsy English it has taken twenty words to say what the Greek gets across in fourteen. Rieu takes thirty-two words for the same two lines.

Some of the loss of richness in the meaning is also easy to illustrate. The Greek throws the word andra, "man" to the beginning of the first line of the poem, emphasizing the fact that the leading character of the story is, indeed, a man, not a demi-god like Achilles, the hero of The Iliad. The adjective the poet chooses to describe Odysseus reinforces this idea. Polutropon means not merely "versatile," but also has some implication of "shifty," and also "much travelled" or "experienced." It is his ability to adapt to a variety of circumstances that is emphasized, not the usual heroic virtues of bravery and strength. Odysseus is not so much the knightly warrior as the embodiment of the adventurous spirit and the clever practical wisdom of the sea-faring Ionian Greeks. The Odyssey is not nearly so backward-looking as The Iliad; rather it depicts the culture and attitudes of a new age of Greece emerging from the Dark Ages, in which memory of its heroic past seemed the central thing in the lives of the people.

It is possible to discuss the ideas, the structure of the poem, the characterization, the descriptions of Greek society--all aspects of The Odyssey which do not lean too heavily on style or language--but it is unwise to stress individual words in the translation or most of the technical effects (See the discussion of Simile).

Authorship

While it is true that epics are episodic, this does not mean that The Odyssey is without structure. Its over-all shape is quite tightly unified, so much so that the structural unity of The Odyssey is usually regarded as the major argument for regarding the poem as the work of one man, even if he may have incorporated episodes he inherited from other bards. This is one question which probably should be raised with the students: If this is a poem made of stories which appear to be handed down from teller to teller for generations, in what sense could any man be called the "author" of the epic?

The answer, of course, is that the materials have been fused into an organic whole that could only be the creative synthesis of one man. No series of bards could make anything more than a series of stories. At least this is the contention of those who believe one man gave The Odyssey its final form. Of course there are those who believe that the poem was put together by "the committee," a group of scholars who assembled the various episodes, according to this theory, in the 6th century B. C. You can see why the scholarly ego would find this theory appealing! Perhaps the most intriguing theory of authorship is the one which maintains Homer was a female Sicilian sailor. In modern times there have been no general agreements about single or multiple authorship of the Homeric poems, though probably most people now agree that

it is unlikely that one man wrote both The Iliad and The Odyssey. The ancient world never doubted that they were both written by one man called Homer.

Invocation: Prudence (printed in italics in our translation)

The poem begins with an invocation, a device frequently imitated by later poets, suggesting that the poet is inspired by "Zeus's Child, the Muse" (page 135), to use Odysseus's phrase in Book 8 where he discusses the art of Demodocus, who also begins by invoking the goddess. In addition to suggesting that the poet is a specially favored man, the invocation introduces a summary of some of the story and its major character.

The invocation also introduces one of the major themes of the poem: it is prudence (hardly a heroic virtue, by the way) that sees Odysseus through. The folly and recklessness of men is at least partly responsible for their destruction; their ruin does not appear to be solely the work of fate administered through the gods: "It was their own sin that brought them to doom. . ." Rieu's choice of the word "sin" here is a good illustration of why one should never lean very heavily on single words in a translation, but rather look at the action itself. "Sin" has connotations for us foreign to the Greeks; it is much safer to look at what the men did in the story itself to determine why they die.

Structure: The Telemachy

The first four books are commonly called the Telemachy, since they chiefly concern the story of Telemachus's adventures in search of news of his father. Some feel they have no organic relationship with the remainder of The Odyssey and must have been an independently created story designed for the education of young men. Telemachus is sometimes regarded as an example of a frame character. That is, a figure who does not participate in the central narrative to any significant degree, or more commonly, not at all. Obviously, Telemachus does not fit this formula neatly, since in Book 16 father and son meet and complete the final action together. However, it is true that Telemachus does not participate in any of Odysseus's adventures on his return home. Perhaps it is best to think of the four books as testing Telemachus, giving him a chance to demonstrate that he is worthy to stand beside his father in the crucial battle in the hall.

The Telemachus episode has a number of other functions as well. Book 1 begins with a brief scene on Olympus explaining the relationship

of the gods to men in the action which follows. Zeus admits that Destiny does determine man's fate to some extent, but man's foolhardy actions are largely responsible for the troubles he finds himself in. This introductory speech by Zeus (page 26), the controller of the action, is an authoritative statement of the major theme: the necessity for prudence. It is the recklessness and foolishness of men, even in the face of warnings from the gods, which brings pain and death to them, not merely the will of the gods. This is a different philosophy from that which underlies The Iliad where the heroes are encouraged to act recklessly, since they have no control over their fates. Those heroes are all much more fatalistic in attitude than Odysseus, the man of many devices. Again Rieu's use of "wickedness" and "sin" makes it look too much as if it is a matter of Christian morality which is in question. Odysseus is really not significantly more moral than his men; he is only smarter and more prudent. The author carefully underlines the changing point of view of his times. Rash heroism is no longer unquestionably admired, and Homer is not telling a story about the old kind of warrior hero. Thus, in the action to follow, the gods may be expected to play a role, but Odysseus is ultimately responsible for what happens to him, and the virtues this epic hero will display are not perfectly in accord with those displayed by the warriors of the heroic age.

In a sense, The Odyssey is a story about the testing of a Trojan hero to see if he can endure in a changed world. While the story of Telemachus can be described as an early example of the transition from innocence to experience (a Bildungsroman*, a work describing the formation and education of a young man, cf. Roughing It.), the story of Odysseus is about the translation of a man of experience from a world that is passing into a new world, in this case a successful passage after many hardships. Or it might be put this way: Odysseus is the Hero and Adventurer and the magic world is a kind of decompression chamber he enters in which Troy and the wanderlust are pumped out of him. Odysseus becomes socialized; his personality is reshaped; he finds an identity that will permit him to be recognized as father, son, husband, and ruler back in Ithaca. After the transforming experience of heroic life at Troy, he must be re-transformed to lead a normal life in a changing world. The Odyssey seems to say that the heroic world of the Mycenaean age has passed, and after a period of wandering and dispersion a new Greek world with a different set of values has emerged.

The Telemachus books also fulfill other introductory functions. For one thing, they introduce us to Penelope and inform us about the situation in Ithaca toward which Odysseus is moving. The picture of conditions there helps maintain a sense of suspense (meanwhile, back at the ranch . . .) through the series of adventures Odysseus encounters. These books also fill in background about what has happened since the Greeks left Troy.

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* This genre is common enough in German literature to establish this term for it.

The Odyssey begins in medias res, "in the middle of things," and then uses a variety of flashback techniques to tell us what has gone on before. The purpose of this method is to begin the story in an interesting and active fashion, rather than by a long, dull narrative of necessary background material. In this case, Homer sends Telemachus off to get information about his father, a pretext that may not seem very well motivated, but it gives an opportunity to introduce Nestor and Menelaus, two heroes who have succeeded in getting home again.

They provide a link of continuity with the Trojan War and develop the theme of homecoming, a major motif of the epic. The first man Telemachus visits is Nestor, so much like Odysseus that "we seemed to share a single mind, so well did we agree. . . " He reports on the events following the fall of Troy and concerning his own homecoming. That it should be Nestor is significant in itself--he is the wise old man of the Greeks, noted far more for his common sense than for his strength or courage. Notice it is in council that he and Odysseus agree so completely, not in battle. The implication is that Nestor has an easy homecoming because he is sensible and the gods do not interfere. Odysseus is not so lucky and perhaps initially not so prudent--he turned back to join Agamemnon you will remember.

Telemachus next visits Menelaus, the man for whom the expedition was formed in the first place. He is now leading a peaceful life at home with Helen; Odysseus's goal is the same kind of family life and reunion. Menelaus is indicative that the Trojan War and all it stands for is behind the Greeks now. His own wanderings before he returns are also suggestive of the narrative we are about to begin. Like Odysseus, he is forced to wander and endure pain before returning home again, wealthy and happy.

Menelaus's account of his wrestling match with Proteus is also our first encounter with the supernatural and prepares us to believe the account of Odysseus when he reports his magical adventures. Both the opening scene on Olympus and the Proteus story make it easier for us to accept the transition from reality, or at least the real world of Homer, into the world of goddesses, giants, and transformations.

You will notice that Proteus also gives information about Odysseus. Homer never leaves us in doubt either as to the condition of his hero or the ultimate outcome of the story. There is also fore-shadowing in many of Athena's statements, for example. So that if Homer succeeds in creating suspense, it is not by keeping us in the dark about the outcome; that has clearly been fated and can not be changed. There is a certain grandeur imparted to the events because this is so, yet there is no loss of interest in seeing the details of the outcome unfolded for us.

Telemachus's visits also are a kind of handbook of good manners, telling how the young address their elders, indicating the proper procedure for performing religious rites (remember the sacrifice of the bull by Nestor and the feast which follows) and providing example of appropriate treatment of guests. Indeed, guest-friendship and the laws of hospitality are a major theme in The Odyssey. The dignified conduct of Nestor and Menelaus, as well as of Telemachus, contrasts strongly with the arrogant behavior of the suitors and puts us in a frame of mind receptive to their punishment by Odysseus.

Finally, the opening books provide an opportunity to introduce Odysseus properly. Two major heroes of the Trojan War praise him highly and the gods reveal themselves generally sympathetic to him, and in the case of Athena, an active partisan in his favor. Incidentally, his patroness is significant. It is not Mars or even Apollo, but a feminine goddess of wisdom who admires his skillful deceptions; as she says, they are "both adepts in chicane" (page 210). Thus, the opening four books are not really irrelevant to the main body of the epic at all. They form a carefully worked out prelude to the main action, introducing themes, characters, and situations of immense importance to the understanding of everything which follows.

There is another way of regarding the place of these four books in the structure of The Odyssey: The Telemachy establishes the world of Ithaca, which must have seemed very familiar, or at least credible, to the people hearing the poem; it is eighth and seventh century B. C. society described in quite realistic terms, both as to its political organization and its social and religious customs. These elements in the Telemachus books are an example of literature moving quite close to history. The next step is to the world of the Phaeacians, more remote, on the edge of the real world, free from cares. Then we plunge deeper and deeper into the magic world, with witches and ogres, miraculous sea voyages, and transformations with a fairy wand. Notice we re-emerge again by way of Phaeacia and then return to the familiar world of Ithaca. The structure of The Odyssey is a fine example of the movement from reality to appearance and from appearance to reality, a major motif of the tenth grade curriculum.

The fifth book marks a fresh beginning and the introduction of Odysseus sitting on the shore in tears--hardly a heroic posture for the first appearance of the principal character. Yet, it is remarkable enough when it becomes understood that the tears are caused by his yearning for home, where he could have dwelled in eternal youth with the Goddess Calypso in her bower of bliss. Odysseus much prefers the joys and sorrows of human life. This is astonishing insight in the character of Odysseus, in its way more awe-inspiring than the deeds of the warriors at Troy, so enamoured

of immortality. In the course of Book 5 Odysseus is translated to Phaeacia in one of the greatest shipwreck scenes in all literature. He remains in the court of Alcinous until Book 13.

This is a good time to stop and examine the time structure of the epic. The total time elapsed in the action is some forty days with only about twenty of them involved in the action proper. The earliest events in the adventures of Odysseus are related (and indeed the largest part of them) in a flashback beginning with Book 9 and continuing through Book 12, the end of the first half of The Odyssey. Odysseus's voyage to Phaeacia and his stay there are approximately parallel in time to the journey of Telemachus in Books 1 through 4. In Books 13 through 16, first the father and then the son return to Ithaca and are united in Book 16. With Book 17, the scene shifts to the Hall, building to the climax (through a series of beautifully developed books) with the slaughter of the suitors in Book 22. The final two books are thought by some to be a late addition, without useful function in the epic. Thus the first twelve books occupy several weeks concluding with a flashback covering the ten years since the fall of Troy. The second half of The Odyssey covers approximately four days.

The Phaeacian books are another illustration of correct hospitality; Odysseus is treated handsomely when he is unknown and royally when his name is told. Indeed, Phaeacia's bounty presents the last great test of Odysseus, for it is quite clear that he may remain and enjoy the ease and wealth as the consort of lovely Nausicáa if he so chooses, and Odysseus makes clear that it is a stern temptation for him after his years of buffeting. It takes immense courage for him to turn to the sea and the possibility of yet more wandering in search for home and a middle-aged wife, when, by remaining, he could have wealth, power, and the lovely young princess. The meeting of Odysseus and Nausicáa, by the way, is usually thought to be an early adaptation of the beauty and the beast folk theme.

Book 8, as was suggested earlier, is a fine example of the role of the bard in Greek society of Homeric times. Homer no doubt draws a flattering picture of the esteem in which the bard was held. Not only does the court admire Demodocus, but the poet has Odysseus himself speak with high reverence for the bard, the prime moral teacher of the Homeric society. Demodocus sings of the gods and episodes from the great war at Troy, probably in just the manner that the tales were told them, that is, brief episodes that could be told in the space of an hour or two. It would take about twenty-four hours of recitation to sing the whole poem as we have it, so probably no one ever did. Perhaps the final formulation of the Homeric epics did not take place until writing had become known, but one should not underrate the memory of the ancient bards. In backward

countries even today there are oral poets who can recite poems as long as The Iliad and Odyssey. In any case, the recitation of tales of Troy by Demodocus prepares a background for the splendid recital by Odysseus himself running through four books. King Alcinous comments on Odysseus's narrative (Book 11), "We are far from regarding you as one of those impostors and humbugs whom this dark world brings forth in such profusion to spin their lying yarns which nobody can test. On the contrary, not only is your speech a delight but you have sound judgment too, and you have told us the stories of your compatriots and your own grievous misadventures with all the artistry that a ballad-singer might display." In the central portion of the poem (notice this speech occurs in the middle of the visit to the dead, where scepticism might run highest) Odysseus himself has become a bard, telling tall tales that make those of Mark Twain seem almost factual. Homer has the king say he believes every word, but we cannot help thinking he must have had his tongue in his cheek, or at least that Homer did.

The second half of the epic puts strange lands behind it and moves in a straight line toward the struggle in the Hall. Book 13 opens with Odysseus's crossing, symbolizing this major shift of scene for the remainder of the story. The rest of Book 13 consists of the fine confrontation between the two great masters of deception, Odysseus and Athena herself. In one of the most significant scenes in the epic Odysseus demonstrates he is worthy of the goddess's patronage by his skills in deceit, not by any acts of bravery. Once they have finished sparring, Athena gets down to the business of planning the remaining action. There is no doubt about the outcome; notice how little this interferes with building suspense in the following books. It is not necessary to keep us in the dark about the ending; the unrolling of the action is so fascinating there is no danger of loss of interest.

Concealed identity is important throughout The Odyssey with its devices of disguise and deceit, but it is especially important in the last half of the epic. The reader's knowledge of the identity of the characters enables him to see the irony in the events of the story. The blindness and stupidity of the suitors doing something they think will benefit them or that they believe they can at least do with no danger is a spectacle which is amusing, but at the same time instructive. Ironic vision helps us see not only how imprudent men can be, but we realize we might be just as guilty of foolishness: After all, these men are not very different from ourselves. Concealed identity is also a means of testing the loyalty of each of the characters in Odysseus's family and household. Fittingly enough, Odysseus himself must pass tests to establish his identity.

While deception is not regarded as a very noble way of acting now, one must remember that in the 8th century B. C., life was rather precarious for the Greek sailor. It was imprudent to say too much about

oneself; even mentioning one's name to strangers could mean trouble. And, as The Odyssey demonstrates, when a voyager had been away from home for long periods of time there was no way of telling what his reception would be on his return.

Are Books 23 and 24 necessary? Without the reunion with Penelope, certainly the action would not seem complete, given the central importance of women in Odysseus's adventures. Also she is the emotional and symbolic center of the family home. Laertes, on the other hand, represents the larger idea of Odysseus's family. Odysseus's acceptance by his father has something of the myth of the lost or prodigal son about it, a return to the family as a long series of generations from father to son, handing down land and power through the blood line from generation to generation. Book 24 also provides an end to the feud, a practical necessity to round out the action.

Subject Matter: Aristocratic Society

If the structure of The Odyssey is epic in its proportion, covering an immense scope, both geographical and chronological, so is the subject matter. It embodies the world view of a people; it is a repository of social, political and religious ideas of the time in which Homer (or the generations of bards, if you prefer) lived. It would be hard to exaggerate the important part that poetic recitation played in the pattern of Greek culture. Plato, as you may remember, thought the influence of poetry unfortunate. The reason he felt so strongly about it was that even in the fourth century B. C., when the Greeks had known how to write for 200 years, memorizing poetry and listening to poetic recitation was still the chief means of education. The Homeric poems were regarded with religious awe by the Greeks and embodied the culture of the aristocracy. The Odyssey is full of typical patterns for behavior which were approved by conventional society. Throughout, one finds the correctness that characterizes the life of a society that admires polite speech and civil behavior. Every member of Homeric society bears one invariable stamp, the stamp of decorum and good breeding in all situations. The Telemachy is often regarded as a book of etiquette designed to teach good manners. The exceptions are generally young and merely prove the rule: the shameless behavior of the suitors is constantly stigmatized as a disgrace to them and to their class.

Mentor watches every step Telemachus takes and helps him at every turn with kindly words and wise advice. In her assumed identity Athena instructs her pupil in the forms of courtly behavior, showing him how to address old noblemen like Nestor and Menelaus, and how to make his request of them in such a way as to ensure success. In the opening lines

of the epic, Odysseus's companions are characterized as Nepioi, the root meaning of which is "unable to speak." They are senseless children, without the power of forethought to control what they say and do. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance attached to speaking well in The Odyssey. Skillful speech is obviously one of the prime virtues of the hero himself.

Among the procedures carefully detailed in The Odyssey are religious observances. Greek religion was not so much a matter of belief as of cult practice. Cult practice was composed of an accumulated mass of procedures which had to be performed skillfully in order to be performed dutifully, properly, and piously. Telemachus's visit to Nestor provides one of the finest examples of the place of religious practice in The Odyssey (p. 61 ff.). Prayer, libation, animal sacrifice, feasting--all the elements of Greek religious performances are there, and in many other places in The Odyssey.

The characters as they speak or act reveal the public apparatus of government (think of the opening assembly in Ithaca) and also the private code of intimate relations between friends and enemies, men and women, within the family and between families. Perhaps no relationship is stressed so much as the proper treatment of guests, obviously highly important in an age where there were no hotels or inns along the way. Without some kind of predictable reception in traveling, movement would have been almost impossible in the Homeric Age.

Thus The Odyssey, at least in the eyes of most classical age Greeks, was a teaching instrument for transmitting the traditions and institutions of Aristocratic society. The epic is interested in correct sentiments, not noble fury; the usages of polite society, rather than the rude conflicts of men in a state of nature (significantly, the major battle in the epic is fought in a hall). Agamemnon, Ajax, and Achilles, the Big Three of rigid heroism are gone--as Homer is at pains to point out from time to time. They may have been simpler and prouder men, but their kind do not have the resourcefulness that Odysseus has to overcome--the trials of life in re-awakening Greece. The great heroes, like Achilles for example, would no doubt have scorned the thought of disguise and deception, thinking it ignoble and hardly conducive to fame. If Odysseus's prudence and self-control seem a bit mean or Machiavellian remember that the Greeks thought prudence and self-control maintain justice and humanity in a society of passionate men. True, this is not tragic; this attitude does not try to transcend the limits of life, but tries to live intelligently within them. The poem seems to foster traditional knowledge, yet it also points away from the static convention and prerogatives of the Heroic Age toward the era of Ionian expansion and exploration. One senses throughout The Odyssey not merely the attachment to ordered

society, but the growing eagerness to learn more about God, man, nature so characteristic of the whole Greek tradition.

Subject Matter: Fantasy

The Odyssey is usually characterized as containing three major elements: first, aspects of the great myth of the heroic past, the tale of Troy. Aside from casual references, there is the frequent use of Agamemnon and his unfortunate return as a foil to Odysseus, the stories told along the way (for example, Demodocus's tale of the Trojan horse), and the vast array of heroic figures among the dead in Book 11. Helen, Menelaus, and Nestor among the living introduce elements of the great story of the Achaeans, and, of course, there is Odysseus himself. Secondly, The Odyssey contains some minor characters that are realistic fictions reflecting the age in which the poet wrote. For example, Fumaeos and the other herdsmen, Eurycleia and the other serving women, and the beggar at the Hall. Finally, there is a large portion of folk tale, centered around the typical folk theme of wandering adventurer. Among the important folk elements are the wicked giant, the beautiful sorceress, the goddess with the magic wand, the beauty and the beast, the virtuous wife, and the return of the rightful king.

The first of these elements, the figures from the heroic past, are used as background to the present story and a contrast to it. The realistic elements from aristocratic life, including the servant class, contribute to making The Odyssey an effective account of Greek life at the end of the Dark Ages. Why the attraction of the folk tales and the fairy world? In the first place, because they provide such good stories. Folk stories and motifs in The Odyssey are probably even older than those of the Trojan War itself, which had some historical basis. Folk tales are part of pre-history, the common heritage apparently of all cultures, dating in origin to the distant past of the human race. The fact that they have survived indicates how universally they must appeal to everyone; there seems to be no question that they record experiences which reach the heart of the human personality. Thus, they can be useful in depicting psychological experience of the hero (see the section on the hero).

However, often the folk materials are not easy to identify in The Odyssey. Sometimes Homer combines several versions of the story as in the Cyclops adventure, or a number of folk themes may be combined into one tale, as in the Phaeacian story where there are the shipwrecked sailor, the beauty and the beast, the magic sleep, and other motifs. But most important, the fairy world had little attraction for the Greeks.

Traditionally, fairy tales are characterized by a delight in overcoming in the imagination the frustrations and limitations of ordinary human life. The more lowly the victim, the more humiliating and painful his situation, the more stirring his release and ultimate triumph. The Greeks did not care much for this yearning for escape from frustration and dullness in human life. They were not attracted by magical adventures of the imagination, and in The Odyssey even where the magical remains it is deliberately suppressed and obscured. The Greeks wanted to master and control human limitations, not ignore or overstep them. As a consequence, the folk tales tend to be rationalized, humanized, and often moralized. That is, the causes of the action are made to seem more understandable and the interest centers in the human wrestling with the problems and perhaps in the evaluation of the characters' actions.

Little is done to build one's awe at the supernatural elements in the stories. The gods themselves, you will notice, are handled in the same way. They are made to be human in their motivations and drawn as if they were merely very powerful human beings; the distinctions between the gods and men are minimized in every way: Menelaus is apparently going to be immortal (Book 4), the goddesses take mortals for lovers and mix freely in other affairs of men, and their motivations seem no different from those of human beings. Every effort is made to reduce them to an understandable level.

The same thing is true of the folk materials. The Cyclops is a fine tale, of course, but it is developed so as to give prominence to the cleverness and ingenuity of Odysseus, and it points a clear-cut moral, right in line with the major theme of the epic: rash action can get you killed--and Odysseus's imprudent outcry at the end almost does.

The shipwreck in Book 5 provides another good example of Homer's tendency to make folk elements less magical. The shipwrecked sailor is a common motif in folklore, and The Odyssey has the characteristic elements: a long sea voyage, a violent storm, destruction of the ship, a climactic struggle in the water in which the hero seems on the verge of death, a total collapse on the shore, alone and naked--plus the possibility of supernatural intervention in the course of the action. Homer's humanizing and rationalizing of the story is easy to see: the picture of Odysseus leaning unsleeping on his oar night after night not merely builds our sympathy and admiration for the man, but the passage also includes a description of the navigational techniques used on the voyage! The intention is to make perfectly clear that it is Odysseus's endurance and skilled seamanship which get him through, not the assistance of magical powers. Later in this episode it is true that the goddess Ino appears to aid Odysseus with her veil. While this does not guarantee

Odysseus's safe arrival on shore, the chief function of her appearance seems to be to demonstrate that the shrewd Odysseus never accepts advice, even from the gods, without thinking it over for himself. Like any sensible sailor he arrives at the reasonable conclusion that he had better stay with the ship, goddess or no goddess.

Finally, the beauty and the beast motif, which follows in Book 6, bears little resemblance to the version we all remember from our childhood. In Homer's hands it becomes a sophisticated comedy of manners and a genre painting of the daily life of aristocratic young women. All of these examples illustrate the realistic, down-to-earth point of view of the Greeks. Homer is too fine a poet not to recognize that folk stories provide wonderful material for stories, but he cannot resist minimizing the magical and stressing the normal, natural world.

Characterization: The Hero

Enough has already been said to make it clear that Odysseus is not an example of the typical war hero. Odysseus has no desire to be a dead hero--no matter how famous. He is too complex, too vital, too much interested in life to be reduced to a stereotyped series of heroic responses. Some students, no doubt, will find him disappointing because it is impossible to idealize him in the usual romantic fashion. He is certainly not cowardly; when cornered or aroused he is deadly. On the other hand, he likes to be ready for a quick getaway, just in case; and, when guile is better than brute strength, Odysseus has no hesitation about using it. He can be cruel (think of his treatment of the serving women) and at other times gentle and loving; his devotion to his family is remarkable. Odysseus is a highly sensuous man, yet sometimes almost ascetic; modest yet boastful, cunning yet straightforward, he is a man of mixed motives in a constant state of inner tension.

From one point of view, Odysseus may be said to be undergoing a psychological adventure, and the tales he tells reflect in external form the psyche's sub-conscious exploration of itself and its experience. Odysseus goes deeper and deeper into the magical world of folk tale, always with diminishing resources until he arrives at Calypso's island, the utter submersion of identity. Only bare consciousness and his enchained will remain to him. This is the nadir, the quiet center of the magic world, Ogyggia, Calypso's home, which Homer calls the navel of the sea. In an ironic comment on his cleverness in the Cyclops adventure, Odysseus is almost reduced to being Nobody. We are born for trouble, the tale of Cyclops seems to say, to stay in the womb is to remain Nobody, security of sorts, but one ends by being devoured. Cyclop's cave is also oblivion, no identity there, no real existence. Leaving Circe is to recognize that pain is the only real basis of life. Circe and the land of Phaeacia also privide forms of immature self-

indulgence which must be left behind to avoid destruction.

There is a real difference between the reckless, self-reliant adventurer who comes to Circe and the weary but determined wanderer who meets Nausicäa. One might mark the stages of his progress by his relationships with women, in fact. He begins the voyage home from Troy by sacking Ismarus on the Ciconian coast and taking the women in the traditional heroic manner: "I sacked this place and destroyed the men who held it. Their wives and the rich plunder that we took from the town we divided. . . ." This is followed by a series of adventurous tales climaxed by the stay with Circe, where, after quickly assuring himself that she won't turn him into a pig, he immediately tumbles in bed with the enchantress. The vision of his dead mother, the procession of Good Women, and the warning of Agamemnon seem to have a sobering effect on Odysseus. Before exposing himself to the temptation of the Sirens, he takes adequate precautions to keep from falling, and at the cave of the nymph Calypso he spends his days weeping on the seashore. In any case, when faced by the severest temptation of all, great wealth and the lovely, innocent Nausicäa, Odysseus is able to say, "Where shall a man find sweetness to surpass his own home and his parents? In far lands he shall not, though he find a house of gold." Odysseus has lived too long and too fully to be tempted simply by the possession of another beautiful young woman; the urge for home and married love is deep and basic in him. However, it is in front of Alcinous's palace that Phaeacia presents its strongest temptation. Alone before the palace and the garden he contemplates the luxury and peace Phaeacia could afford him a long time before he plunges into request his voyage home. It took considerable moral stamina to move ahead to the trouble and uncertainty he was sure to face.

Probably the most impressive part of his magical experience is the Book of the Dead, which revisits and summarizes the Heroic Age for the last time, fixing in this sad but detached elegy the great persons of the tradition; at the heart of that complex episode the shades of the Greek heroes come forward, including the greatest of them, Achilles. Odysseus says, "In the old days when you were on earth, we Argives honoured you as though you were a god; and now, down here, you are a mighty prince among the dead. For you, Achilles, Death should have lost his sting." Achilles replies, "Spare me your praise of Death. Put me on earth again, and I would rather be a serf in the house of some landless man, with little enough for himself to live on, than king of all these dead men that have done with life." No statement could make clearer that the Heroic Age is over. It is true that Nestor, Menelaus, and Helen live on, but merely as receptacles of memories of the deeds at Troy. Odysseus emerges from all this experience an altered personality in a world whose values have also changed.

Perhaps the most important thing to do in examining the character of Odysseus is to resist the temptation to call him "modern"; this is just another stereotype and highly insulting to the Greeks, who, after all, had just as mature an understanding of life as we do--as Odysseus demonstrates.

Simile

The one characteristic literary device of the epic that probably cannot be studied so effectively elsewhere is the simile. Like metaphor it involves a comparison between two things. The technical distinction between them, of course, is that simile links the two things compared with "like" or "as." The difference to emphasize, however, is that metaphor aims at condensation and suggestion; brevity and complexity tend to be its most marked qualities. Simile, on the other hand, tends to be explicit, longer and looser in construction, and because it usually has a fairly detailed explanation of the comparison intended built right in, its meaning is likely to be simpler, more direct and less suggestive. The simile is not a device that is in very good odor with contemporary poets. For one thing, they rarely write anything longer than a short lyric and cannot afford the leisurely development that simile entails. The epic form with its ample sweep provides the kind of space necessary for effective use of simile. The epic does not seek to crystalize a moment of great intensity as lyric does; it works in quite another way, seeking to convey a sense of monumentality, a breadth and grandeur of scope overpowering in its magnitude.

Some examples chosen at random from Book 5 will illustrate the kind of use Homer puts this figure to. On page 89, Hermes "swooped down on the sea, and skimmed the waves like a sea-mew drenching the feathers of its wings with spray as it pursues the fish down desolate gulfs of the unharvested deep. So Hermes rode the unending waves. . . ." What is the function of the simile in this passage? It obviously adds a touch of movement and picture which heightens the vitality of the passage. Also the slight accent of humor we feel at the idea that the god may get his feet wet as he skims over the waves humanizes him without damaging his celestial dignity. And finally, drawing as the comparison does on simple, natural life, it helps keep the poem planted in the enduring earth, no matter how magically it may soar above it at other moments.

Two other examples drawn from these pages also use imagery from the natural world: ". . . Poseidon the Earthshaker sent him another monster wave. Grim and menacing it curled above his head, then hurtled down and scattered the long timbers of his boat, as a

boisterous wind will tumble a parched heap of chaff and scatter it in all directions" (page 97). And the second: "Pieces of skin stripped from his sturdy hands were left sticking to the crag, thick as pebbles that stick to the suckers of a squid when he is torn from his hole" (page 99). In the pile of chaff simile, Homer is stressing the pettiness of Odysseus and the insignificance of his fate; he enacts an unimportant instant in the long drama of the life of Nature, as if he were a piece of straw or a dry leaf. The squid comparison also suggests the level of life Odysseus has been reduced to and sharpens our sense of the animal-like tenacity with which he clings to the rock. It may be that the use of the squid adds an element of terror to the scene as well. Grouped this way, it is easy to see how Homer uses the similes to move away from the magical world of folk tales to the normal, natural world.

Finally, the other examples from Book 5 draw on subject matter from human life: "He felt all the relief that a man's children feel when their father, wasted by long agonies abed in the malignant grip of some disease, passes the crisis by god's grace and they know that he will live. Such was Odysseus's happiness when he caught that unexpected glimpse of wooded land" (page 98). And the second: "(Odysseus) lay down and piled the leaves over himself, covering his body as carefully as a lonely crofter in the far corner of an estate buries a glowing brand under the black ashes to keep his fire alive. . . ") (page 101). The first of these has a pathos, you might say a sentimentality, which may seem alien to the rest of the shipwreck story. It gives an idea of how strongly the Greeks felt about family and of course stresses the restoration of a father to his family, so close to the heart of The Odyssey, at the moment when Odysseus is about to bring an end to his long suffering. The last of them--vividness and the emotional appeal of simple country life to which Odysseus is returning combine in a striking fashion at the close of the story. The simile unites a sense of his isolation and exhaustion with the prediction of reawakening vitality, making a strong affirmative conclusion to the book. Each enriches the old folk tale with elements of real Greek life.

Symbolism: The Olive Tree

A writer creates a symbol by using the name of an object ("olive tree" for example) in such a way that the name not merely evokes the object itself, but also suggests that the olive tree has additional meaning. One way of making an object into a symbol is by using its name again and again in important positions; the reader soon assumes the author intends special meaning for the object. Consider how often some form of the olive tree plays a significant role in The Odyssey. Odysseus uses an olive branch as a brand to burn out the eye of the

Cyclops; the axe Calypso gives him with which to build his raft has an olive-wood handle. He is preserved on the desolate Phaeacian shore by an olive thicket. The next day he is transformed from something of a beast into something of a beauty by an olive oil bath, and olives, ripe and dark, grow in Alcinous's ever-fruitful garden. In the palace at Ithaca, Odysseus's bedroom is built around the olive tree that forms his bedpost. Homer seems to intend not merely to show that the olive tree and its products are common in Greek life, but implies that the olive tree has meaning as well. A symbol of vitality? Or the fruitfulness of the natural world? Of Odysseus as natural men? Of the strength of the family? Or Greek society? It is difficult to say which of these meanings are intended--perhaps all and others as well. One of the most powerful things about symbols is that they express a kind of meaning that it is impossible to fully paraphrase; their suggestiveness is too rich to be confined.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS (possible answers in parentheses)

1. The ancient Greeks never doubted that The Odyssey was composed by one man, called Homer. Today many scholars think this highly unlikely. How can you decide a question like this? What evidence can you find, even though you read a prose translation?

(The quality of answer you get here will vary with the sophistication of your students, but you should be able to use this to lead into a discussion of structure. It is highly unlikely that a group of story tellers could produce a complex epic which is tightly unified, an organic whole. You may wish to ask the students if there are any episodes (or characters) that are unnecessary to the story. The following question is designed to suggest such an episode to them.)

2. The first four books are commonly called the Telemachy, since they chiefly concern the story ot Telemachus's adventures in search of news of his father. Some feel these books are tacked on. What is their relationship to the rest of The Odyssey? Can they be regarded as introduction? Why bring in Nestor, Helen, and Menelaus? Or, for that matter, Telemachus? Odysseus does not appear until Book 5--is that the real beginning of the story?
(See under Structure, pp. 5-11, of this essay.)

3. The first paragraph, printed in italics, is an invocation, the traditional way for a bard to begin his recitation (see the bottom of page 135 and the top of page 136). What purpose does it serve? Could it be called the introduction of The Odyssey? Compare the beginning of The Odyssey with the opening of a play or a novel or even a short lyric poem you have read.
(See Invocation, p. 5, in this essay. Questions 2 and 3 are useful in themselves, but they have the added value of raising the issue of what special problems a writer faces in the opening section of his work. The students should discover that beginning has similar problems in most forms--for example, the introduction of characters, situation, and theme--though the solution of them will be modified by the demands of the form.)

4. What is the role of the gods in The Odyssey? Are men puppets who jump when the gods pull the strings? Or do they have some control over their own fates? Why bring the gods into the story? Do we like Odysseus more or less because Athena is his friend? Or doesn't it make any difference? Why is Athena on Odysseus's side? Are the gods just in their treatment of men? Is Homer critical of the gods? Does he use them as an excuse for men's actions? Are they like good and bad luck to us?

(Zeus makes the gods' position clear in his opening speech: men are at least partly responsible for what happens to them. While the gods know what is to happen, they do not completely determine it. One purpose of the story is to clarify the relationship of man to the gods and to help the Greeks deal with them correctly. When Homer gives the gods human emotions and weaknesses, this makes them dramatically alive and more easily understandable, but it leaves him open to the accusation of falsehood, made by later Greeks like Socrates, in reducing the gods to a human level. If The Odyssey is not perfectly clear on the question of free will, it is not perfectly transparent on the matter of rewards and punishments either. Most

of what happens to Odysseus seems to be fated without question of merit. On the other hand, Athena seems to feel Odysseus deserves her help, though more because he is a clever trickster than because he is morally good. The Greeks were no more certain of the answers to these questions than we are.)

5. Books 9 through 12 contain a flashback (an episode in which we learn about something that happened earlier) in which Odysseus tells about his adventures, very like a bard telling a story. Are his adventures just a series of entertaining tall stories or do they have a purpose that fits a major theme or themes of the epic as a whole? Is there a logical, not merely chronological, order to them?

(The essay on The Odyssey, in this unit, points out how the themes of hospitality and prudence, the Greek guides to conduct, are commonly the "moral of the story." The students may notice that the adventures begin by Odysseus and his men being the aggressors and soon moving to the defensive; Odysseus also becomes more and more isolated until he is finally alone. The adventures become increasingly more magical until his visit to the Dead takes him out of the real world altogether, and then the action reverses direction toward reality until his arrival in Ithaca. Also the dangers shift from direct physical harm to more subtle temptations. You will notice how frequently the adventures pose the still very present question of liberty with its hazards versus security of a number of humanly destructive kinds: the escapism of lotus land, the slavery of the appetites of Circe, and the temptation of comfortable immortality of Calypso. One of the ways of bringing some of these things out is to discuss one of the episodes in some detail and then compare it with other adventures.)

6. Is the Cyclops adventure just a good story or does Homer expect his audience to learn something from it? Does Odysseus learn something? Who wins, Odysseus or Polyphemus? What does Polyphemus do that is wrong? Or Odysseus? Why is it appropriate that Polyphemus should lose his eye? Is Odysseus's punishment appropriate? Do his men deserve their fate?

(Obviously there is a great deal to be learned from the story--far more than these questions and answers can encompass. Neither can be said to "win," of course. Because of his lawless, uncivilized conduct Polyphemus is rendered helpless and dependent. The story goes to considerable lengths to make the point of the advantages of civilized, social group action. Without it the Greeks would never have escaped, and they do obtain their objective of overcoming brute force and getting the booty. If adventurous action has its rewards, it also has its price, as the death of the men in the cave indicates. Odysseus's unrestrained boasting and egotism get their reward too.)

7. Is there any similarity between the Cyclops and Circe episodes? Do you think Homer means the men were literally turned into pigs? Is there another possible meaning? Why does Homer introduce Hermes to provide a means of escape, rather than have Odysseus rely on his wits, as he does in the Cyclops story? Does Odysseus really escape the charms of Circe? Why do they leave?

(The matters of hospitality, prudence, and liberty versus security are all relevant again. This story raises the issue perhaps as clearly as any other of how literally we are to interpret folk tales. Generally speaking, in addition to the surface level of the action the students should be able to see that the stories frequently have an allegorical meaning--here it can be seen as a story about gluttony and slavery to the appetites.. You will notice that they stay for a year as it is, and Odysseus was perfectly willing to enjoy Circe's hospitality a good while longer. It is the men who urge him to leave. It is important to see the marked contrast between the attitude of the men and the attitude of Odysseus throughout this adventure. On page 166 Odysseus says, "I could not refuse this challenge to my adventurous spirit." The men have clearly learned the lesson of Polyphemus's cave far better than Odysseus, as Eurylochus's speech on the top of the next page demonstrates. The question of the help of the gods is a general one throughout the epic: In this instance Odysseus is dealing with a goddess, and only a more powerful god can help him. Some students will probably object to the favoritism that Odysseus enjoys, just as they may be critical of modern heroes who always seem to have luck on their side. Odysseus endures a great many trials and temptations on his own, and the real question is what kind of man Odysseus reveals himself to be, not how he escapes from any particular situation.)

8. Notice that Circe tells Odysseus (and us) what his next series of adventures will be. Does this build <u>suspense</u> or destroy it? Often you are told in advance how the adventure will end--does this kill your interest in the story? At what point in <u>The Odyssey</u> do you know how the story will end? What effect do the frequent prophecies and omens have on the story? Do present day writers still use these devices? (See discussion of <u>suspense</u> and <u>foreshadowing</u>, pp. 6, 7 in this essay.)

9. A <u>simile</u> is a comparison of two things, traditionally connected by "like" or "as," but there are other possible ways. The best way to think of it is as a long comparison which goes into quite a bit of detail. <u>Metaphor</u>, on the other hand, is without a linking word between the things being compared and is generally quite brief and compressed. Simile is usually found in long poems like the epic, whereas metaphor is more common in short lyrics. Can you explain why? Find some of the similes in <u>The Odyssey</u> and see how they are used. Does Homer have certain kinds of images he likes to use in similes? Do they always serve the same purpose, or can you find similes that have different effects?

(See <u>simile</u>, pp. 17-18, in this essay, which discusses a number of similes from Book 5. It could be a very useful exercise to compare the use of simile in the epic with the use of metaphor in lyric poems the students have read.)

10. Is Odysseus a superman, or is he pretty much like every man? Is he heroic? What are his weaknesses? His strengths? Does he treat people fairly? How about the serving women? The suitors? Why is Odysseus being punished? Or is he being punished? Does Odysseus change as a result of his adventures? If he does, in what way? If he does not change, should he have? Notice how much Odysseus seems to enjoy women. Does he change in this respect? Does he really love Penelope? Is he trying to get home to be with her, or does he have another purpose? Does Penelope

love him? If so, why does she tolerate the suitors? Would you expect Odysseus to stay home once he got there? (Remember Teiresias's prophecy on page 174.) Do you admire Odysseus? Why? Why not?

(This by no means exhausts the possible questions that the complex character of Odysseus raises. Some indication of the sort of response you should hope for can be found in the discussion of his character in the essay earlier in this unit.)

11. Imagine you are a historian hoping to learn something about Greek society from reading The Odyssey. How much of it do you think is reality and how much appearance or make-believe? Do you think the Greeks really believed it possible to visit the dead? (Remember how Alcinous reassures Odysseus that he believes his story.) Or that there really were one-eyed giants then? What parts of The Odyssey tell you the most about Greek life? Which the least?

(The essay in this unit suggests something of the range of information about Greek life that can be learned from The Odyssey: sea-faring, religion, family, society, politics, warfare--the list could be lengthened indefinitely. There is a fine paper-back which is largely a pulling together of this kind of information: The World of Odysseus by M. I. Finley (Meridian).)

12. Are we very much like the Greeks? Better? Worse? Do we treat one another differently? Are our goals any different from those of the Greeks? Are we more highly civilized? Whether you answer yes or no, explain what you mean by "civilized." We tend to talk a great deal about progress these days. After reading The Odyssey do you think we have progressed since the time of the ancient Greeks?

(This is the most subjective question on the list, as it is the most general. Probably most teachers would agree that our morality is hardly any better and that very little of the progress that we have made is in the area of making man a more civilized human being. "Modern" is usually taken to imply "superior" in wisdom and culture, among other things, but this is probably more optimistic than the reality warrants!)

13. Finally, after having looked at The Odyssey in so many ways, what is an epic? How is it different from a novel? Or is it different? Does it have any similarities with tragic drama? Sometimes movies are called "epic"--does it mean the same thing? Is it chiefly the story of one man? Does it cover a long period of time? How much time does The Odyssey cover? Does the epic have to be written about a special kind of place? Would it still be an epic without the gods? (Some teachers may quite reasonably wish to begin with this question. There is certainly no reason why you should not do so; however, it is an effective summary device and the definition you reach will probably be a richer one at the end of the discussion of The Odyssey. You may find it useful to deal with this question both at the beginning and at the end. There is a discussion of the epic form at the opening of this unit.)

SUGGESTED EXERCISES AND TOPICS FOR COMPOSITION

1. Several works you have read earlier in this program have used a journey as a symbol of a change that takes place within a character. In "The Price of the Head," for example, the journey in the open boat marked a spiritual progress made by Pellett as he emerged from drunken degradation to the repossession of his soul. In what way might the journeys of Odysseus symbolize self-discovery? Does he return to Ithaca a changed man? Was this change necessary? Are the qualities of a fighting soldier the same qualities needed to govern a kingdom at peace? Write a page or two discussing your ideas, using references to the story to illustrate your conclusions.

2. Before we actually meet Odysseus in the story, we learn about him both from the gods and from other people. His exploits have made him something of a legendary figure, and his reputation lifts him above the level of ordinary men. As the story unfolds, Homer allows us to see some of his human weaknesses. Compare Odysseus the hero with Odysseus the man as he is revealed to us. Use examples from the text to back up your statements

3. The adventure of Circe's island might be regarded as an allegory. Write a possible interpretation of the episode from this point of view.

4. There is an old saying that discretion is the better part of valor. Many times Odysseus behaves with more cunning than courage. Illustrate this aspect of his character with examples from the story.

5. Penelope may be regarded as a symbol of the ideal Greek woman; similarly, Telemachus receives instruction in the requirements of ideal manhood. Write an account of Greek society as it is reflected in The Odyssey.

6. Dissatisfaction with life as it is seems to be a recurring theme of literature. King Arthur attempted to create a perfect society, young Sam Clemens in Roughing It sought "The Garden of Eden" on a remote island. The search for perfection appears to be a universal dream. Why, then, did Odysseus reject the comfortable immortality offered him by Calypso, and choose to return instead to the harsh realities of the world of Ithaca? What are the rewards of human life, short though it is, that make it more desirable than immortality?

7. Compare Odysseus with a contemporary hero--an astronaut for example. What major difference do you see in their public behavior? Are there any similarities in their characters? How can you explain these similarities and differences?

8. The gods, while they themselves are exempt from obedience, administer the moral code of the Greeks, and follow the affairs of men with intimate interest, often intervening in their behalf. Write an account of the help given Odysseus and his family by the goddess Athene. Why is it appropriate that this particular goddess should offer her protection to these people?

9. While the Odyssey is based more on legend than on history, modern research has shown that Troy did indeed exist, and a military expedition actually took place, probably about 1250 B. C. With the help of your librarian, see what factual material you can find, and prepare a report to share with

the class.
[Note: See National Geographic Magazine, May 1962. "Oldest Known Shipwreck Yields Bronze Age Cargo." Also see The Lost Ships by Peter Throckmorton, Little, Brown & Co.]

10. Why do you think The Odyssey is still popular today? Have people changed very much since Homer's time? What human questions raised in The Odyssey are people still asking today? Are we still faced with the same temptations that delayed Odysseus and his men on their return to home and duty? What modern parallels can you think of? Either express your ideas in a few paragraphs, or illustrate your ideas with the outline of a story about a returning soldier who must make the adjustment to civilian life. What kind of temptations might delay his return to the mundane daily routine?